



FACT SHEET

Influenza ("Flu") & Influenza Vaccine

❑ WHAT IS IT?

Influenza or "flu" is a contagious respiratory disease caused by a virus which infects many parts of the body, including the lungs. Someone who has the flu spreads the virus by sneezing, coughing, or even talking. Flu may be transmitted by direct hand contact.

❑ WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GET THE FLU?

The whole body suffers from it. Typical symptoms include:

- ✓ Fever, chills, weakness, loss of appetite, and aching of the head, back, arms, legs.
- ✓ Sore throat and a dry cough, nausea, and burning eyes may occur.
- ✓ Temperature may rise to 104° F, but after two or three days the fever goes away.
- ✓ Often the person continues to feel tired and sick for several days.
- ✓ Sometimes the person can have complications, such as dehydration or pneumonia.

❑ IS FLU CONSIDERED SERIOUS?

- ✓ For healthy children and adults, influenza is typically a moderately severe illness. Most people are back on their feet within a week.
- ✓ For people who have chronic health problems such as diabetes, asthma, heart or lung problems, influenza can be very severe and even fatal. These people are often considered to be at high risk.

❑ WHO GETS THE FLU?

Anyone can get the flu.

❑ WHO SHOULD GET FLU VACCINE?

People who should receive flu vaccine include those at risk of complications if they get influenza disease, and adults and children who live, work, or may come in contact with people at high risk. These groups specifically include:

- ✓ All children 6-59 months of age
- ✓ Women who will be pregnant during the influenza season
- ✓ Persons aged 2-64 years with chronic medical conditions such as heart disease, lung disease (including asthma), kidney disease, or diabetes
- ✓ Children and adolescents (aged 6 months-18 years) who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy to prevent the risk of Reyes' syndrome
- ✓ Persons with certain muscle or nerve disorders (such as seizure disorders or severe cerebral palsy) that can lead to breathing or swallowing problems,
- ✓ Persons with weakened immune systems due to HIV/AIDS or other diseases affecting the immune system, long-term treatment with drugs such as steroids or cancer treatment with x-rays or drugs
- ✓ Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities that house persons of any age who have chronic medical conditions
- ✓ All persons aged 65 years and older, with or without chronic medical conditions
- ✓ Persons aged 50 - 64 years should be vaccinated because of an increased risk for influenza-associated clinic, emergency department, or hospital visits, particularly if they have a high-risk medical condition

Flu vaccine is strongly recommended for:

- healthy household contacts and caregivers of children aged 0-59 months and persons at high risk for severe complications from influenza
- Health care workers

Annual flu vaccine is also encouraged for anyone not mentioned above who wishes to avoid influenza infection.

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❑ WHAT ABOUT REACTIONS TO THE VACCINE?

- ✓ Most people have little or no reaction to the vaccine.
- ✓ One in four might have a swollen, red, tender area where the vaccination was given.
- ✓ A much smaller number, more children than grownups, might also develop a slight fever within 24 hours and many have chills, headache, or feel a little sick.
- ✓ People who already have a respiratory disease may find their symptoms worsened. Usually none of these reactions lasts for more than a couple of days.
- ✓ Allergies
- ✓ Adverse reactions to the vaccine have been observed in some people. These could be due to an egg protein allergy, since the egg in which the virus is grown cannot be completely extracted. These people should be vaccinated only if their own physician believes it necessary and if the vaccine is given under close observation by a physician

❑ HOW ARE FLU AND ITS COMPLICATIONS PREVENTED?

- ✓ A vaccination encourages the body's immune system to develop immunity to the influenza virus types in the vaccine.
- ✓ Influenza vaccines are made yearly, so they contain influenza viruses expected that year.
- ✓ Someone vaccinated can not get influenza from the vaccine.
- ✓ Antiviral drugs can be prescribed by a health care provider to prevent infection in persons who cannot be vaccinated and after exposure to someone with the flu.

❑ HOW ARE FLU AND ITS COMPLICATIONS TREATED?

- ✓ For uncomplicated flu, your doctor will probably tell you to stay in bed at home as long as the sickness is severe and perhaps for about two days after the fever is gone.
- ✓ Antiviral drugs can be prescribed by a healthcare provider to treat influenza and prevent complications in high-risk persons,

but must be administered early in the infection, usually within 48 hours. Antibiotics are not effective against the flu.

❑ CAN YOU HAVE A RECURRENCE OF FLU?

A person can have influenza more than once. Here's why:

- ✓ The virus that causes influenza may belong to one of three different flu virus families. Influenza A and influenza B are the major families.
- ✓ Within each flu virus family there are many viral strains.
- ✓ Both A and B strains cause illnesses of varying severity. The influenza A family has more virulent strains than the B family.

**Report all King County cases to
Public Health by calling (206) 296-4774.**

Available in alternate formats.